# Genre and Identity in Social Media[[1]](#endnote-1) Natasha Rulyova, University of Birmingham (UK)

This chapter examines how identities are constructed in social media, particularly, in the blog, and how a variety of genres are used by the blogger to shape a range of identities. The blog helps the blogger to establish a contract between her and her audiences, and, in turn, to reach out to specific communities of followers. The focus of my case study is a blog that has been written in Russian by the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who has kept his blog on the LiveJournal website at [http://navalny-en.livejournal.com/](%20%20http://navalny-en.livejournal.com/%20) since 2006. My analysis is informed by the understanding of genre as *social action* (Miller, 1984) and a discursive conception of identity (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 2003; Hall, 1990, 1992, 1996). To examine the blog as a multimodal text, I apply Kress’s (2010) social semioticapproach to communication (p. 26). I also draw on van Leeuwen’s (2008) understanding of discourse as the *recontextualization* of social practice, which allows me to examine how identity is constantly recontextualized—or re-shaped through the use of genre—in response to changing contexts.

Currently, most researchers view the blog as a publishing platform (Miller & Shepherd, 2009; van Dijk, 2004), not a genre. However, this was not the case when the blog just emerged. Initially, researchers considered the blog as a genre because most early bloggers used it to write a kind of personal journal/diary. Since then, bloggers have explored and enjoyed a great variety of genres (for more info, see Rulyova, in press). Although the majority of blogs are produced by and represent individual agents, there are also blogs written by groups of people. There are personal, political, institutional, corporate and other types of blogs (see Giltrow & Stein, 2009). The blog examined in this chapter is written in a variety of genres and mainly, though not exclusively, by the owner of the blog, Alexei Navalny. During the time when Navalny was not allowed to have access to his blog due to allegations against him by the authorities the blog was run by his wife and his close allies.

Any analysis of social media websites including the blog presents a number of methodological challenges. First, the content of such websites is complex: still and moving images, multi-lingual content, and intertextuality (e.g., links to other texts/websites and un/acknowledged quotations). Second, this multi-faceted content is produced by users who act as producers, consumers, writers, readers, listeners, viewers, and reviewers. Third, the analysis of the content of social media websites needs to be done in relation to social organization.

In his approach to social communication, Kress (2010) acknowledges both the complexity of online communication and its relation to the social sphere. Further, he focuses on three main notions: discourse, genre and mode, which are defined in the following way:

*discourse* offers meanings to be realized; it shapes the world of knowledge as ideational ‘content’; and provides a social-conceptual location. *Genre* offers the means for contextualizing /locating/situating that meaning in social spaces and at the same time provides an account of the social characteristics of those spaces. *Mode* offers meaning-laden means for making the meanings that we wish or need to make material and tangible—‘realizing,’ ‘materializing’ meanings. (Kress, 2010, p. 114, emphasis in original)

In other words, Kress explains that the “two terms, discourse and genre, make it possible to refer to ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of meaning-making and of meanings in the world” (p. 114). The distinctions between the functions of discourse, genre and mode are helpful not only to see how communication is conducted but also to identify the role of agency in the process of communication:

Discourse answers the questions: ‘What is the world about?’ and ‘How is it organised as knowledge?’ Genre answers the question: ‘Who is involved as a [*sic*] participants in this world; in what ways; what are the relations between participants in this world?’ Mode answers the question: ‘How is the world best represented and how do I aptly represent the things I want to represent in this environment?’ (Kress 2010, p. 116)

Kress’s approach further positions genre not only in relation to agency but also in relation to social organization (1985; also see Bazerman, 1988; Swales, 1990). In genre studies, this view of genre has been developing since the 1980s. Genre can be viewed as social action(Miller, 1984) and can also be described as “forms of life,” as “ways of being,” as “frames for social action,” and as “the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and [as] the guideposts we use to explore the familiar” (Bazerman, 1997, p. 19). Given that genres reflect and are reflected in patterns in the social sphere, genre analysis has become a helpful methodology to examine the content of social media, a space where social practices take place recurrently, and in great numbers. The forthcoming volume *Emerging Genres in New Media Environments* edited by Carolyn Miller and Ashley Kelly provides further evidence of how genre approaches are productively applied to the analysis of new media texts. The popularity and extensive use of social media websites makes it possible to observe how social practices and rhetorical actions occur across the world and in different languages, as users access the same global social media websites (e.g., LiveJournal, Facebook, Twitter).

It is useful to distinguish between these social media websites/ platforms, and genres, in which users communicate. Social media platforms provide users with a fairly homogeneous space and rules for communication. Facebook, LiveJournal and Twitter provide similar affordances to users in different national languages. Genres, on the other hand, are influenced by cultural and linguistic specificity, as demonstrated below.

The concept of *recontextualization*, which was developed in the sociology of education (Bernstein, 1990), allows us to shed light on the differing ways genres are used in linguistic, cultural and semiotic discourses. This concept has been employed in Bernstein’s discussion of “curriculum” and “school science” as the recontextualization of the practices that took place in the laboratory. Fairclough (2003) has also employed the concept in his discussion of textual transformation from one discourse (e.g., academic) to another (e.g., managerial. Further, van Leeuwen (2008) explored how recontextualisation could help to theorize the effects that discourse has on social practice. van Leeuwen views all texts as the presentations of social practices, demonstrates how social practice is (re)shaped through texts.

In this chapter, I use the concept of recontextualization to examine how the genre utilized by the social media user/agent depends on the communicative purpose. Bloggers choose a genre of communication and self-representation depending on who they wish to reach out to and what they wish to achieve through this act of mass (self)communication, to use Castells’s (2011) term. Recontextualizing oneself and one’s writing is a necessary part of the blogger’s activity, as the blog is an ever-changing entity. The blog has a beginning but no definitive end. It is non-finite, and, therefore, it has a capacity for endless recontextualization. The blog is in constant motion and change; it consists of texts and is an arena for discourses to interact. In a true Bakhtinian (1986) sense, the blog represents a variety of discourses which co-exist in their multiplicity and complexity, and are often in dialogue with each other. This representation of a variety of discourses in a blog is more spontaneous and varied than, say, in a novel, which Bakhtin (1981) used as his object of examination, because blogs are more open to external forces. They can be edited in an on-going fashion; they are inherently intertextual and have looser boundaries than other texts, such as novels. What the blog is to the novel could be compared to Bakhtin’s description of how the novel relates to the epic. (Bakhtin, 1981). The novel for Bakhtin engages with contemporary reality in the ways in which no other genre could previously do. The novel is adaptable to changing conditions; it is open-ended; it allows for different discourses to coexist in one piece of writing; it is dialogic and polyphonic. The blog provides affordances for all these qualities to be taken to a new level: the blog allows for any contemporary discourses to be included; the blog is unfinalised in that as long as it is online it can be accessed by online users who can add comments and create references to the blog. The blog provides affordances to adapt to fast-changing social reality and makes it possible for the blogger to reshape online identity. The blog’s capacity to provide intertextual references including to visual and other types of texts is limitless.

It is also productive to briefly compare the role of the blogger/the agent with that of the novelist. The blog has the affordances to create the plurality of voices and consciousnesses that Bakhtin admired in the work of Dostoevsky (1984). However, unlike the author of the novel, the blogger is under constant pressure to review and reshape her texts and entries in reponse to online users. In other words, on the one hand, the social practice of blogging “articulates” discourses (Fairclough, 2003, p. 25); on the other hand, texts in the blog shape blogging as a social practice and create the blogger’s online identity. As such, blogging encourages the blogger’s or the agent’s regular self-recontextualization.

The blog, a site where discursive practices take place over time, provides an opportunity for continuous identity formation. With the blog’s archiving functions, which allow for the storing of all entries, blogging identities have a past and a future. The blogging identity fits the definition of identity provided by Hall (1990): a “‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation” (p. 222). Hall argues that there is no such thing as one unified identity because identity can only be perceived as such through a coherent narrative of the self about oneself (1990). In social media, we face exactly what Hall described as “a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities” (1992) with which the user can identify for a certain period of time. This discursive concept of identity echoes the understanding of identity developed in both social sciences and the humanities in recent years (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 2003; Hall, 1990, 1992, 1996).

Butler’s concept of performativity is also instrumental in understanding the role of genre in identity formation. According to Butler (1990), identities are shaped by performative actions and behaviours. Performativity is an act through which speech and gestures are internalized. Identity is constructed through the process of repetition of speech acts and reiteration of social actions. Butler’s focus is on gender construction. She argues that gender is no more than a “stylish repetition of actions” (1990). Butler’s understanding of identity construction through performance and repetition is reminiscent of the way, in which identity is linked to genre in genre studies (in Education and Linguistics, in particular). Like Butler, who says that identity is caused by the repetition of speech acts and gestures, Schryer (2002), a genre studies scholar, insists that identity is shaped through the use of genre where genre is a response to a recurrent rhetorical situation (Miller, 1984). Schryer’s conclusions about the role of genre in identity construction are similar to Butler’s definition of performativity. Schryer writes:

we genre our way through social interactions, choosing the correct form in response to each communicative situation we encounter—and we are doing it with varying degrees of mastery. At the same time ‘we are genred’. (p. 95)

In other words, identity, including gender identity, is constructed through the use of existing genres by the agent in response to recurrent rhetorical situations.

The production of identity can also be understood in the context of broader contemporary debates about subjectivity, self, and self-realisation. Friedman (1999) argues that in contemporary society individuals appear to have an increasing choice of horizontal options for identity construction which are replacing vertical relationships inherited through family and genetics (though with genetic modification and other gene manipulation it is possible to widen horizontal options on the level of genetics too). Vertical identities are those which children inherit or learn from their parents, such as the colour of the skin, language, religion, tastes, etc. Horizontal identities refer to differences between children and their parents; it is possible to acquire a horizontal identity. For example, being transsexual, deaf or multilingual could be examples of horizontal identities (for further information, see Solomon 2012). In the globalized world of increasing horizontal options for identity construction, education (in a wider sense) plays an increasingly important role. Instead of “inheriting” or accepting features of our identities as given, individuals can choose and “perform” (within limits) not only social class but also race, gender and sexuality. By broadening their range of available genres, individuals increase their chances for successful communication.

Educationalists and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genre studies scholars emphasise an increasingly important role of genre and learning in the process of self-identification. Kress (1999) makes this point very succinctly: “After all, it is impossible to be authentically ‘me’ in my writing if I do not have anything resembling real command of the resources of writing (in this language)” (p. 463). Kress make explicit the connection between using semiotic resources and expressing the self, which is especially pertinent in the context of social media. Kress also underscores that literacy is multimodal. To successfully communicate their identities, individuals not only need to learn how to write, but also to learn how to utilize sounds, images and moving images.

Some educationalists are sceptical about the role of genre in identity construction. Kress (1999) recognises some potential problems with the increasing power of generic interactions:

The impulse for writing has shifted: from desire to power, from the individual to the social, from expression to communication, from creativity to conventionality, from authenticity (a question of fit with personal truth) to appropriateness. (pp. 463-464)[[2]](#endnote-2)

In the world of globalised media, when conventions and patterns of communication are constrained by dominating social media formats, such as Facebook and Twitter, it seems difficult to see much space for individual creativity. While some suggest that technology forces users to shape their identities in particular ways, I argue that there is space for creative interpretation of genres (see Tardy, this volume) as long as the authorities, with the help of technology, do not start punishing those who avoid prescribed ways of behaving online.

In my analysis of Navalny’s blog below, I explore the potential for creativity when pre-existing genres are localised, updated, and adapted to local contexts. I argue that the potential for creativity is located in the individual’s capacity for interpretation within the laws of the genre. While Bakhtin (1981) posits “each word tastes” (p. 293) of previous users, this does not prevent new users from using the word anew (with different levels of creativity). In the same way, pre-established genres carry meanings that can be re-interpreted by new users when the genre is pushed into a new linguistic and cultural environment. Bawashi and Reiff (2010) describe genre as an “actualizer” of discourse; however, genre can become an actualizer only through its unique and individual performance by the subject who inevitably brings spontaneity to the genre performance (p. 27).

When users start their blogs or social media accounts, they seemingly have the possibility of creating their identities from scratch. They can write under different names. They can pick their gender, age, social group, make up their biography and background, and create a number of believable identities online. The physical body of the user and her virtual identity do not have to correspond to each other. That said, the user is restricted by her semiotic resources and ability to use technology. By choosing a language to write in the blogger finds herself in a particular cultural and linguistic environment, restricted by its boundaries and conventions. The choice of language and discourse predetermines the audience and, therefore, identity is constructed in response to the particular social milieu, a particular segment of internet users.

Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of dialogism is crucial to understanding this process of identity construction. The blogger’s identity emerges within a particular discourse (which is informed by local practices), in certain rhetorical situations, and always in response to the potential audience. The online identity is located at a certain website or a platform and, therefore, is also, to some extent, shaped by the global platform. So, the identity, say, of a Russian-language blogger informed by local discourses is channelled through global online formats. By employing a genre, an individual user establishes a contract with a particular social group or a segment of social media users. By writing in an existing genre, the blogger responds to the expectations of her potential readers/viewers. Sometimes new media users create new genres in response to a need or a gap created in social reality. For example, the emergence of a new technology, such as dashboard cameras (dashcams) has led to the advent of a new media subgenre, which can be described as contribution to the “fail genre”. Before the appearance of dashcams, Russian drivers were not represented as a group on the internet (Rulyova, in press). Now Youtube is full of the videos of car crashes that take place on Russian roads[[3]](#endnote-3). Dangerous driving in Russia has become a globally known phenomenon due to its representation in online space. Now individual Russian drivers with dashcams in their cars have a choice of constructing their own identities vis-à-vis this new subgenre referred to as the “fail” genre.

Coming into being in dialogue with the prospective audience, the social media user’s identity is performed through genre. Bazerman (2002) argues that genres shape “intentions, motives, expectations, attention, perception, affect, and interpretive frame” (p. 14). He explains:

when you start writing in those genres you begin thinking in actively productive ways that result in the utterances that belong in that form of life and you take on all those feelings, hopes, uncertainties, and anxieties about becoming a visible presence in that world. (p. 14)

The success of the blog (if we assess it by the number of followers) depends on how well bloggers negotiate appropriate genres to reach out to audiences and to shape their own identities. As these identities are in the process of constant re-production, they need to be recontextualised and re-shaped amid changing circumstances.

There are two sides to bloggers’ identities: bloggers as they appear to other internet users in their blogging entries, that is, as products of their own blogs, and bloggers as agents. The latter can be subdivided into *the rhetor* and *the designer*, according to Kress (2010). The rhetor’s task is political—he assesses:

the social environment for communication as a whole. . . to shape [the] message such that the audience will engage with it . . . [t]he designer assesses what semiotic—representational—resources are available, with a full understanding of the rhetor’s needs and aims . . .. Th[at] is a semiotic task. (pp. 49-50)

The agent as rhetor chooses the discourses and genres of representation, the agent as designer is in charge of choosing the material resources (e.g., what platforms to use, what visual or written texts to produce). Acting as a rhetor and a designer, the agent produces a discursive/textual identity or multiple identities, depending on their communication aims. These identities are in constant process of re-production; are communicated with the help of available semiotic resources, and are re-shaped in response to the audience and to changes in the social context.

To summarize my conceptual framework, the social media/blogging identity comes into being in a particular discourse (which has particular social, cultural and linguistic characteristics), and *in response* to existing discourses and potential audiences. The blogger’s identity is inherently dialogic: predetermined by the potential audience and *performed* through genres. The genres, of course, provide a potential contract between the blogger and other users while also acting as a link between local discourses and global online formats. The blogger’s identity is continually re-contextualised in response to the changing aims and purposes of mass (self)communication.

## Case Study: Alexei Navalny’sBlog

The emergence of Alexei Navalny’s public persona is strongly associated with his active presence on social media. He has been blogging in Russian since 2006, according to the archive of his blogging website (Navalny, n.d.f). Since 2011, Navalny’s blog has also been available in English (Navalny, n.d.g). In addition, Navalny has a Facebook account (Navalny, n.d.e). He has a Twitter account (Navalny, n.d.h) with over 1.03 million followers as of 12 April 2015. In addition, in 2013 when he was running for the Mayor of Moscow he acquired a website (Navalny, n.d.a).

Navalny is a prominent critic of President Putin and a renowned critic of corruption among Russian politicians. He emerged as a leader of the opposition during the presidential elections in 2012 at a time when anti-Putin protests were organized primarily through social media websites, and when the opposition protested against the allegedly unfair election. In his blog, Navalny published documents disclosing corruption of State Duma (the Russian Parliament-like body) deputies and other Russian politicians. Following this, Navalny was accused of money-laundering by the authorities and tried in court more than once. In July 2013, he was sentenced to five years in prison before the sentence was suspended. In October of the 2013, he was again convicted to a five-year term for embezzlement, and, again, this sentence was suspended. Shortly after, new money-laundering charges were brought against Navalny and his brother. In February of 2014, Navalny and his brother were prosecuted on embezzlement charges and Navalny was placed under house arrest and restricted from communicating with anyone but his family. In December of 2014, he was sentenced with another suspended prison term of three and a half years while his brother received an actual three and a half-year prison sentence.

As mentioned above, Nalvany’s participation as a candidate in the Mayoral election in Moscow, the capital of Russia, marked his emergence as a politician. He started his campaign the day after his five-year jail sentence was suspended when he was able to run for the Mayor’s office. At the beginning of his campaign, he was supported by 2% of the vote. As a result of a very well organized campaign, he took 27% of the vote against 51% taken by the Kremlin-supported Sobianin in September of 2013. During his campaign, Navalny received very little coverage in the national government-controlled media (including main TV channels), where the majority of publications about him were negative. Alternative media, such as *Dozhd.ru* (*Rain.ru*, an independent TV channel and website), and *Ekho Moskvy* (*The Echo of Moscow*, an independent radio station), supported Navalny’s campaign. In the Western media, Navalny is often portrayed in a positive light as the strongest opposition figure to Putin.

It has long been acknowledged that Navalny’s political and public persona was formed through his well-coordinated and persuasive online and off-line activities. In turn, my research asks: How does the rhetor and designer, Navalny, shape his identity in a blog? What discourses, genres, and modes has he used since 2006? Have they changed depending on the social and political context? What are the genres wherein he performs his identity?

*Discourse of Navalny’s Blog*

Since starting his blog in 2006, Navalny positioned himself within alternative and informal discourses. His early blogging contains some informal expressions from the Russian internet slang known as *Olbansky language* or the *language* *of* *padonki* (scumbags’ slang). This slang is characterised by the phonetic spelling of Russian words and by ignoring conventional spelling and grammar rules. The very appearance of this slang in the Russian-language internet is associated with alternative discourses, youth sub-cultures opposing the official and “grown-up” discourse (see Böökli, 2009; Zvereva, 2012).

With time, Navalny’s discourse has remained alternative but less marked by *Olbansky*. Instead, Navalny turns to the use of metaphorical language, poetic references, and the use of some derogatory language for satirical effect. For example, during his Mayoral campaign, Navalny attacked his main competitor, the incumbent candidate to the mayor of Moscow from the government-supported United Russia party by making references to the poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), a Russian writer known as the poet of the Bolshevik revolution. Navalny writes, “To take the chord that would ‘send rumblings’and be heard in each Moscow flat, especially in the 308 square meters apartment at 13 Rochdel’skaya st.” (Navalny, n.d.f). This alludes to Mayakovsky’s lines: “Frightened, a Neva aristocrat is wincing / And Narva and Vyborg and Okhta areas / will hear the bursts of provocative laughter”[[4]](#endnote-4) (1917/1939).[[5]](#endnote-5) Navalny critiques Sobyanin, who used his position to acquire a very large apartment on Rochdelskaya street, by comparing him to the frightened aristocrats forced out of their properties by the Bolsheviks.

In the tradition of late Soviet *steb*, a peculiar type of late-socialist discourse of humour based on the aesthetics of the absurd (Yurchak, 2005, pp. 249-50) and post-Soviet irony, Navalny plays with Soviet and post-Soviet jargon. For example, the following sentences use the Soviet discourse of five-year economic plans and achievements to speak with light humour about the success of his Mayoral campaign: “Strengthen our activities in cubes. Earlier we organised 30-50 cubes per day. From Thursday onwards we will deliver 146 cubes.” “Cubes” here refer to his mobile mayoral campaign stalls manned by his supporters with the purpose of distributing published materials in support of Navalny.

Navalny ironically applies other well-known Soviet clichés and phrases, such as the often quoted hyperbole, ascribed to Vladimir I. Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, by Maksim Gorky, a well-known Soviet author, according to whom Lenin describes Leo Tolstoy as *chelovechishe* (a giant of a man) (Gorky, 1924/2002). Navalny uses the term satirically to describe Vladimir Yakunin, the president of the Russian Railways company and a high profile government official (Yakunin is also physically a rather large person), whom Navalny accused of being involved in corrupt activities.

Navalny often writes his blog with strong ironic and even satirical undertones to expose many corrupt officials, such as the controversial leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, Vladimir Zhirinovsky. For example, the title of one of Navalny’s blog posts was “Zhirinovsky’s little son and his Dubai apartment with seven bathrooms.” Navalny uses the diminutive form “a little son,” which has a strong negative connotation when used to denote a grown-up person, especially a politician. Navalny often uses metaphors (e.g., similes: “thief-emperor” / “vor-amperator” [sic] to express his attitude toward the Russian government’s position on Ukraine [posted on 12 March 2014[[6]](#endnote-6)]), metonymies, and other figures of speech).

At times, his satire borders on being ethically questionable, especially when—in order to provide evidence of officials’ corrupt and illegal activities—Navalny publishes photographs of their relatives and children, and includes copies of documents, passports, and other identity documents that became available to him without the owners’ permission. As another example, in a blog post styled in a folk fairytale genre and titled “A Christmas Fairy-Tale ‘A Fox’s Vine for a male Cinderella’” (n.d.f), Navalny leaks copies of documents showing that a member of the State Duma[[7]](#endnote-7) owns a €2 million property in France. Navalny attaches pictures of the property, maps, quotations from the Facebook correspondence of the Duma member’s son, the son’s picture with the Eiffel Tower in the background, copies of the Property Purchase Contract and other supporting materials.

Overall, there are some recurrent features in the way Navalny employs discourse. His language is subversive, highly critical of the government, oppositional, and satirical. So, his blogging identity is informed by alternative oppositional discourses, and it is shaped within those discourses both in response to and for the users of these discourses. As his campaign has shown, young educated professionals are his main audience and supporters.

*Genre and Identity in Navalny’s Blog*

The most noticeable change that Navalny’s blog has undergone is a massive proliferation of genres through which Navalny choses to communicate in his blog since 2006 (Navalny, n.d.f). At the beginning, he started, as many other bloggers, using the blog as a *personal journal* by entering relatively short postings, some of which were of a personal nature and some, political. However, step by step, Navalny the rhetor begins to employ other genres, for example, that of investigative journalism. In the Russian context, this genre can be traced back to the late Soviet period and, in particular, *perestroika*. For Russian people, this genre is associated with television programmes, such as *Vzglyad* [*Glance/Point of View*], and with magazines and newspaper articles, such as the *Ogonyok* [*Little Light*]*,* the *Argumenty i fakty* [*Arguments and Facts*]. In his blog, Navalny uses techniques characteristic of this style of writing, including direct speech, quotations from official documents and from others’ speeches, and personal commentary. For example, on 6th November, 2013, Navalny added a posting, “Watch it once again” (Navalny, n.d.f), which was a re-posting from a year before featuring a video about the liberal Russian journalist Oleg Kashin, who reported on controversial social and political issues, being beaten up. The blog features the violent scene as recorded on a security camera. Republishing the materials, Navalny comments on the lack of progress with the investigation into this case, and calls for police accountability to people instead of to the leading authorities. The genre of this blog post is similar to the write-ups of investigations, which emerged as a genre during *perestroika*. These genres have the same social motive (to reveal problems with police corruption), and employ similar rhetorical and linguistic strategies (e.g., persuasion, ellipsis, quotation, repetition). While writing in this style, Navalny acts as a *journalist-investigator*.

Along with acting as a journalist-investigator, Navalny also acts in accordance with his professional training as a *lawyer*. In his blog, he conducts a *legal investigation* by publishing legal papers and procedures.He also performs as a lawyer when he engages with the genre of drafting laws. One of the recent laws that he proposed stated that the State Duma members (deputies) should not buy cars worth more than 1.5 million Russian rubles (at the time, 1 ruble was roughly equal to $0.33 US). In addition, in his legal work published on the website, he comments on existing laws and legal documents, translating them into the vernacular. Writing in this genre, he acts as a *legal consultant* or *adviser*. Navalny also continues to use his blog as a *personal journal* to some extent. In it, he shares his impressions from his travel abroad (Italy, for example), and reflects on daily occurrences. So, Navalny acts both as a *legal consultant/adviser*, translating legal documents, and a *personal journal writer*, narrating about himself, his life, and his family.

Of all the genres that Navalny has used, he is most successful at attracting attention to the blogs about his campaigns against Putin and against “crooks and thieves,” as he calls members of the United Russia, a leading pro-government party associated with President Putin and his supporters. While writing in this genre he acts as a *campaign organizer*. For example, he has been running a few campaigns on his websites: (1) the “Rospil” Project, a non-commercial project to control state purchases (Navalny, n.d.a); (2) RosYama, an internet project aimed at improving the quality of Russian roads (Navalny, n.d.b); and (3) RosZH K Kh, an internet project aimed at improving the quality of housing services (Navalny, n.d.c ). Each project has its own individual goals and strategies. One common feature shared by all three projects is their participatory structure. Each project’s website invites users to submit their complaints (whether they are about bad roads or about the lack of water pressure), to distribute the project’s leaflets, and so on. These projects are not confined to the internet and their strategies rely on both online and off-line resources and activities. The projects are also used as political resources. For example, on 30th May 2013, a banner reading, *Putin is a thief,* appeared in the main square of a Russian city. This led to the city authorities calling on the police and issuing to the citizens an administrative protocol for defacing municipal property. Responding to this, Navalny used his campaign website to urge city volunteers to respond to the actions of the authorities by measuring and listing all of the multiple potholes on the roads in the centre of the city.

During the Mayoral campaign in Moscow, the range of genres which Navalny used to engage with his electorate further increased. As a Mayoral candidate**,** he was giving public speeches, which were consequently posted online and distributed through his blog, Facebook, Vkontakte (a Russian counterpart of Facebook, https://vk.com/) and Twitter. As a *Mayoral campaign organizer*, in his blog he published questionnaires, polls, graphs, posters and videos. Off-line he also introduced a few new genres of political agitation, some of which were interpretations of Western election genres adapted to the post-Soviet context or variations of early Soviet propaganda techniques, such as agit-trains (agit[ation]-trains, or trains covered in political slogans) (see Taylor, 1979). Navalny admits that he borrowed some ideas for his campaign from President Barack Obama’s election campaign and from the US television series *The* *Wire* (2002-2008).

In February of 2014, Navalny was put under house arrest, and banned from using any media including the internet. Shortly after that, his blog posts were resumed by the so-called “collective Navalny.” Navalny instructed his wife to run his Twitter account and members of his Foundation for Fighting against Corruption to run his Facebook and Vkontakte accounts.

*Adjusting Genres to Local Needs*

As mentioned above, there are two sources of genres from which Navalny has been borrowing in his online and offline political campaigns. The first source is the early Soviet (Bolshevik) propaganda and the second one is contemporary Western political campaigns.

The Bolshevik political propaganda (preceding and immediately following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia) was varied and creative. It was inspired by artistic Russian avant-garde movements (e.g., Cubo-Futurists, Constructivists) and conducted in a great variety of genres, including posters, political agitation trains, political agitation boats, traveling theatrical performances, documentary and feature films (Golomstock, 1990). Mayakovsky was one of the founders of *the Okna ROSTA* (*Windows of the Russian Telegraph Agency* [*ROST*]) project (1919-1921), which was known for inventing a new genre of the political poster to promote the Bolshevik revolution and its values (see ROSTA windows, n.d.). Russian avant-garde artists and constructivists, in particular, worked in a number of modes: photography, poster, photomontage, and some others.

Early Soviet genres and constructivists’ stylistics are now used by both anti-government protesters (such as Navalny) and pro-government supporters (for example, in videos promoting the pro-government youth movement, *Nashi* [*Our*]). Navalny re-interpreted some of these political agitation genres during his election campaign by employing new ways of fostering collective social action; including, the “cubes” (mobile campaign stalls), campaign posters in the subway, and campaign slogans on private cars. As mentioned above, the mobile campaign stalls were used to distribute campaign newsletters and leaflets, and to recruit new volunteers. Offline activities involving volunteers and Navalny himself were digitally recorded and posted on his blog with comments and calls for support. These comments were complemented with visual maps showing support for Navalny in Moscow by district as well as with sociological data about the campaign, reports on Navalny’s meetings with supporters, photo evidence, information about financial support received for the campaign, and appeals to voters to support him.

In addition to written texts, pictures, and videos posted by Navalny himself, his blog also includes materials posted on behalf of his supporters (e.g., a cartoon). During his mayoral campaign, Navalny’s blog included texts in a variety of genres, such as Facebook reports on volunteers’ work, LiveJournal and Twitter updates on the campaign, photo evidence of Navalny’s meetings with voters, copies of the relevant articles in the mass media (both positive and negative) with commentary, and television appearances in shows about election debates on both pro-government and alternative channels. His blog also included appeals to voters, reminders to vote, updates on polls in the media, information about online polls, complaints from supporters about the current Mayor, and so on.

The genres used in contemporary Western political campaigns have been familiar to Russian politicians since the 1990s when, among other organizations, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the International Republican Institute both arrived in Moscow to promote democracy and disseminate knowledge about the ways in which political campaigns are organised in the West. It has long been acknowledged that the former Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s victory in 1996 was to some extent attributed to the help provided by Western political consultants as well as the support of the Russian media oligarchs (for more information on the role of the media in politics under Boris Yeltsin, see [Zassoursky, 2004]). Throughout the 1990s, Western genres unknown to Soviet audiences also appeared in popular culture, including, television and film. One such example is the adaptation and subversion of the Western genre of the television quiz show which saw the *The Wheel of Fortune* being transformed into the Russian *Pol’e Chudes* (*Field of Miracles*), which then led to the form and content of the show being changed beyond recognition (Rulyova, 2007).

In analysing Nalvany’s blog, we also observe a hybridization of genres, or genre mixing (Fairclough, 2003, p. 35), that is, the phenomemnon of several genres being mixed and used in one text, in addition to the proliferation of genres. Instead of using the genres discussed above in their original form (if there is such a form, as genres constantly transform and adapt to new social conditions and new technologies), Navalny’s blog uses hybridized and mixed genres. The genres are also adapted to the more vernacular or colloquial speech, which is characteristic of blogging and writing for other social media.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In the course of his blog, Navalny, the rhetor and the designer, has chosen a variety of genres to shape his identities. Each genre, such as the genre of investigative journalism or a legal genre, has been used by the rhetor, Navalny, to communicate with the audience with a particular purpose in mind. The choice of the genre in each case has allowed Navalny to perform in a particular social role: as a citizen journalist, as a public lawyer, as a citizen of Russia, as a Mayoral candidate, and as an opposition leader. All of these roles are constructed through informal vernacular discourses which permeate all Navalny’s texts. Hybridized (or mixed) genres, such as a vernacular form of a public lawyer speech (which is afforded by the platform of the blog), allows Navalny to shape himself as a new type of a public lawyer who is enagaged with social media and is comfortable to bring visual means to support his arguments.

Navalny the rhetor uses various genres to recontextualize his identity while, in turn, enhancing his social presence. Depending on the changing context and his communicative goal, Nalvany recontextualizes his identity and communicates his selfhood by employing a variety of genres. Put another way, his discursive identity is constantly being recontextualized and reshaped in genres that are relevant and available to him. The choice of genre determines his audience (and vice versa) while creating links between Navalny the agent and Navalny the product of discursive practices. By performing a range of available identities, which Navalny uses to deliver messages to certain online communities, he achieves greater authority and emerges as a leader of the Russian opposition.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the blog of the Russian opposition leader, Aleksei Navalny, this chapter has examined how bloggers use genres to shape their online identities in social media. This chapter has demonstrated how Navalny, the rhetor and designer, used an increasing number ofgenres to construct corresponding identities, depending on his communicative purpose. While he started as a private blogger, writing about his personal life, in and through his blog, he developed and performed a range of identities, including that of public figure, journalist, lawyer, politician, and organizer of civic campaigns. All these identities are performed through genres, which are hybrid in that they combine features of other genres. When Navalny the rhetor chooses campaigning genres and techniques borrowed from the US context, he adapts and mixes them with early Soviet political genres. In the process of adapting to contemporary online discourses, these genres become hybridized and often localised. The Navalny case study demonstrates that social media platforms provide affordances for agents, or new media users, to creatively shape new horizontal identities. Internet users have access to limitless linguistic, cultural, rhetorical, historical, literary and other resources which they can pick and choose from in order to create messages and identities. Genres play a crucial role in the construction of horizontal identities by offering some channels through which new identities could be performed.

Social media identities are shaped by local discourses and performed through genres. First, these genres act as contracts between bloggers and their audiences. Second, these genres act as links between global online platforms and local discourses. For example, Navalny, as we explored, uses global online platforms to channel his messages and his identity with the help of the genres that are familiar to his audiences; the genres are transformed by his creative use of local discourses.

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2. From personal communication with Gunther Kress (email dated 23 March 2014), I understand that his view has since changed. He is now thinking of writing in multimodal environments in terms of *design,* and, therefore, the concept of creativity needs to be reviewed. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itMdLTd1l4E; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taqHJ9U-Vts . [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. An editor’s note: “Neva aristocrat” alludes to Russian aristocrats who, prior to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, used to live in spacious apartment buildings on Neva Drive, one of the most prestigious areas in the imperial St. Petesrburg. “Narva, Vyborg, and Okhta areas” refer to poor parts of St. Petersburg where the working class used to live. With the advent of the Bolshevik revolution, the majority of aristocrats were expelled from their large apartments, and murdered or sent to GULAG, while the Communist Party leaders moved to their apartments; some working class families were allowed to live in these apartments, one family per room, at time allowing the original owner to retain one room. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This and other translations from Russian are provided by the author of the chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. An editor’s note: the post is no longer available on-line. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. An editor’s note: The lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russian legislature. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For further discussion of increasing conversational discourses in public sphere, see (Gillmor, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)